

Parenting the Gifted

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Spirit and Opportunity: Re-exploring Giftedness and Parents' Expanding Directive Role

Spirit and Opportunity have recently captured the attention of many of us as they rove the surface of Mars to help us find out whether life once existed on that distant planet and, if so, how such life opportunities might be resurrected for the benefit of present-day humankind. It is exciting to observe on television the enthusiasm of NASA's interplanetary space scientists who invented, constructed, and now implemented those space-exploring mechanical rovers to do that task.

But, I propose that it can be just as exciting to think of what we might accomplish if we applied those same kind of exploratory principles, mechanical wonders, and excited belief in "spirit" and "opportunity" to our own "planet" of past experiences in gifted education.

Just think: Instead of repeatedly reconfiguring what we've been doing over the past decades, looking for the waters of gifted life in old paradigms, we might seek to describe, foster, and even predict new ideas about where, when, and how giftedness can emerge more effectively in our children. Actually, some of the leaders in our field have begun to do just that by probing the depths of past innovators in gifted education to look for insights about what it means for a human being to be gifted or even to become gifted. An earnest effort has begun to determine what the important questions are that we must ask to find that critical water of gifted life. We as parents can become important catalysts in that effort by making sure the researcher-explorers are asking the right questions. Let's consider what some of those questions might be that our gifted explorers should be asking.

To begin with, just what is the spirit of gifted education, and what opportunities have we used to foster the giftedness we've seen in our children? What are the basic truths about giftedness that we as parents have seen and experienced as we follow, nay, *direct* the development of our children? In what ways did sandstorms of misinformation or geological upheavals among theories about just who is or is not gifted bury our good sense about nurturing the creative responses we see on a daily basis in children? How might the promotion of giftedness be different than it was 10 years ago or 50 years ago, especially given the fact that we now know that infants are incredibly more responsive than we had assumed? Are teachers in our schools working under the same principles now as then about how to teach children who are showing precocious understanding and gifted behavior, or are there new principles they and we have overlooked? What constitutes gifted behavior? Are there new options for parents to assist in that discovery process?

As a matter of fact, might parents be allowed, expected, even encouraged to be the educators primarily responsible for action plans and implementation?

Will programs in schools change to accommodate a wider variety of gifts? And is there revised thinking about the gifted paradigm itself, that is, what it means to be gifted, when, where, and how? More importantly, are there essences of wisdom about the nature and origin of giftedness that we might retrieve, even beyond the inevitable mixture of gene control and nurturing direction, just as the rovers have found that water really did exist on Mars? And, of course, how might we know such helpful identification information? That is, where shall we mount our rovers for exploration?

As we will see, a number of current leaders in our field have already been actively pursuing such retrospection, as well as looking into the future, generating rich ideas that give hope and direction, spirit and opportunity, to our task as parents for nurturing emerging giftedness in our children. I believe their explorations will stimulate a multitude of important ideas about directions we as parents can and should be pursuing. Here are but a few.

Educational Planning— By Parents in Collaboration With Teachers

In Piry's (2003) review of Karen Rogers' book *Re-forming Gifted Education: Matching the Program to the Child*, he suggested that the book is written primarily for parents and provides "a comprehensive overview of educational provisions" (p. 95). "Chapter One . . . provides the rationale for parents of gifted children to take the initiative [italics added] to present school officials with a proposed educational plan beginning with kindergarten enrollment so that curriculum and instruction is matched with the child's developmental level, instead of his or her chronological age" (p. 94).

Could that, in fact, mean that both parents and schools might/should make adjustments for different sets of readiness? (Developmental studies show that children in general follow a similar timetable for the emergence of various physical attributes and skills, although individual differences do occur—humans are not programmed robots.)

One question I frequently hear from parents of young, bright children, is: What is the best age for entering kindergarten? For some parents, it is about entering 1st grade, and for others, it is about early entrance to college since many gifted youth negotiate only some of the K–12-designed sequence. Though most schools operate under state guidelines about the date and birth month that permit public school enrollment, such pronouncements do not always reflect individual children's development and needs. Granted, any institutional arrangement as vast as the educational one of our country or of other countries must establish some sort of guidelines for decision making, and not all adults may be informed enough to adjust guidelines wisely. Private schools and homeschooling may operate under different guidelines, and circumstances for families vary. Some children are eager and ready to jump ahead, while some may benefit greatly, socially and emotionally, from the shelter of home where parents have the time and resources to open doors to rich experiences for them, experiences that will add to their later academic life. It appears from Rogers' book that we as parents are being urged to take a much bolder initiative regarding such directive roles.

Novel idea? Scary idea that parents might request individuation in school curriculum and educational provisions? Or, is this an idea that many of us have been seeking for a long time? I am reminded of my husband and I, sitting in the principal's office in the "subordinate chairs," thinking about how to defend one of our teenage son's decisions

to take a course concurrently at the nearby university when that option was still a novel idea. We three had to be convincing enough to persuade the principal that this youth could indeed accommodate the regular high school's history course by attending 2 instead of 5 days a week (with the teacher's acceptance of the plan) while also attending a pre-engineering university math course the other days. We also had to ensure that his health would not suffer if he ate his sandwich lunch (a minor concern to him) on his bike on the way over to the class, although the principal was more concerned with how to record our son's nonpresence at the high school.

Moving forward in time, at a recent, more collaborative scenario, one in which the parents were the initiating partners, 8-year-old Sally's parents pondered over what the best option would be for Sally's next year in school. Her recent scores on the school district's gifted identification instrument made her eligible for transfer to another school for the district's special gifted program. Her parents wondered if the transfer would necessarily be the best option for Sally given that she seemed to have bloomed in her current program with teachers she loved and an older sister who would stay at this bright neighborhood school. Or, would it be best for her to join the advanced program that required bussing, new friendships, and social adjustments? In what ways might it be possible for these parents to work with the teacher in planning supplementary options to complement the lesson plans that seemed to suffice for most of the children in her grade even though instruction sometimes covered material and skills Sally already had well in hand? These parents believed their own *extracurricular* provisions for Sally (enrichment from a different viewpoint) seemed to be stimulating growth, satisfaction, and happiness, at least for the

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time being. Her social development also seemed to fit well for the most part with some of her classmates.

Fortunately, this district was amenable to either option, and Sally was quite pleased with the plan to remain in her current setting, maintaining interest and challenge through some independent projects. As the year continued, her parents realized that it was not always possible for them to bridge the divide. They hoped that possibly an itinerant teacher with a background in gifted education might become available to work with Sally and a few similarly abled classmates to further enrich the options they arranged for her in out-of-school settings. An important point is that these parents were able to be major decision partners about the process. Rogers' approach presumes that we as parents of the 21st century must become familiar enough with options, bolster our spirits with courage, and learn to communicate with school-based educators in ways that will generate cooperative options or opportunities, rather than resistance.

The Contribution and Role of Extracurricular Activities

In addition to the required curriculum, "extracurricular" is a commonly used term among those who write or talk about planned and unplanned activities associated with schools and communities that engage youth in areas of interest. Piirto (1994) discussed Simonton's work on talented adults and how they develop their talents, stating that "the best predictors of adult eminence are nonacademic activities and extracurricular activities" (p. 346) and not necessarily scholastic honors, though she does warn of meaningless and trivial faddish curricula. She also described how outstanding scientists tend to come from families who are academically ori-

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ented and who model outside interests often shared by their children.

Olszewski-Kibilius and Seon-Young (2004) surveyed 230 gifted students enrolled in a university summer gifted program regarding their participation in extracurricular activities in and outside of school. Their research showed that the gifted adolescents they studied were involved in a range of school-based and community-sponsored extracurricular activities. They described how these activities gave students multiple opportunities to gain skills, knowledge, and support beyond that available in basic school courses. They warned, however, that extracurricular activities are in danger of being eliminated when school budgets are cut. Unfortunately, their research sample was biased towards high socioeconomic status, including parental education, income, and racial/ethnic background and may point to the plight of less-fortunate youth.

So, in this year of celebration of the anniversary of major Supreme Court decisions in the support of diversity and equal access, we are reminded that, as parents and citizens, who are committed to the nurturance of gifts in all our children, schools may not deliver needed resources for important extracurricular activities. These activities may have to be derived and driven by the parental and

family units to which our children belong, above and beyond what happens within the schools.

Technology Impacting the Future of Learning Goals

When we entered this new millennium several years ago, almost everything we encountered or read about, quite predictably, reflected both a look back at what our world had accomplished or failed to accomplish. There was also a look forward to what the future *might* bring. Now, 3 years into this millennium, we've begun to be barraged by futuristic examinations, just as Spirit and Opportunity are doing in their exploration of Mars. Thinkers and doers in gifted education are more purposefully considering how our procedures with highly able children will actually impact or change the future of learning goals themselves.

Such pondering becomes especially relevant when one considers the accelerating rate at which advanced technology is permitting us to explore new avenues. For example, computerized, robotic-driven exploration vessels roam Mars, and MRIs actually display and record the paths of remembering—tracing information storage directly within individual brains and following the path taken when we retrieve that information. We are beginning to be able to study in real time through photographed images the paths being taken as information passes through the brain. We appear to be looking for new directions as we plug recent research discoveries into old formulas and understandings, reevaluating how we have in the past approached challenges in educating, schooling, and nurturing, or as we generate new conceptualizations of the phenomenon of giftedness and its possible developmental parameters. Especially relevant have been the theories and insights about what gift-

edness actually entails in our current and diverse world—theories that demand that we look again at what we propose are the real needs of children with gifted potential. We are beginning to ask whether one's culture, race, or ethnicity alter the gifted paradigm or at the least the way in which the paradigm might reveal itself. For example, do the advanced abilities of a Chinese child growing up near Mongolia differ or are they comparable to those of a Canadian child growing up in Saskatchewan? Are different abilities applied when a child from the U.S. attends a Canadian school in Singapore? As an example, one enterprising theorist proposed that multiple and diverse expressions of qualities of intelligence with unique characteristics are more ecologically sound than the standard quantitative IQ idea of giftedness of traditional Western education (Hilson, 2004).

Recently, *Time* magazine devoted an entire issue (September 8, 2003) to looking into the future to predict the next paths in human endeavor across a range of endeavors. While Kelly's (2003) futuristic goal was described as focusing on "big ideas and big personalities poised to influence our landscape" (p. 8), the individual articles tended to focus on innovative technology emerging in movies, music, TV shows, and anything else defined as "cool" by youth. Some of this focus seemed to lack depth and philosophical underpinning. We are thus reminded to consider carefully any of our field's futuristic projections regarding the development of the gifted human child, lest we become overimpressed with superficial possibilities and overlook the meaning of living a gifted life and its implications for parents who nurture their gifted child's development.

What we have encountered during those first 3 years of this millennium ranges from a horrific instance of terrorism brought into what seemed the safe confines of our nation's borders to an

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escalating war that seems to involve the entire globe—the entire human race. The advances in technology and in basic knowledge about human development and possibilities seem life-changing enough to wonder whether the pace and direction of change has been guided by any sort of wisdom or whether we are on a superspeed train engineered by a thoughtless robot. We might also think about whether adopting entirely new perspectives and new directions in our conceptualization of giftedness is actually a movement forward, or if it is instead a move backward.

As we've begun to catch our breath, so to speak, it seems that we must use our foresight, at least with regard to the most effective and thoughtful ways of priming and preparing our own children for living a gifted life. The explosion of information on genetic potential and brain development and activity gives us much direction in considering the future developmental nurturance of giftedness, which we might construct and deliver to our potentially gifted children (*opportunity*). However, as Hertzog and Bennett (2004) concluded from their study of two Midwestern school districts with distinctly different gifted and talented

programs, we parents have become an increasingly important element in determining which way the winds of educational and schooling decisions blow (p. 103). The availability of school and community resources, values, and notions of giftedness influence parents' perceptions of what their children need. Families can be drawn into the planning process by educators who are more sensitive to the way family values and perceptions influence the design of educational programs for identified gifted students. Programs tailored more to student needs would empower parents in their child's education (*spirit*).

Spirit and opportunity, lead us on! GCT

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